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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the use of language for learning for students with mental disabilities. It focuses on language comprehension, retrieval and recall of previously presented information, and general effectiveness in integrating language skills for the purpose of successful functioning in a classroom or other social context. The paper begins with an overview of the language demands of the school setting. Two models of communication skills are presented that provide frameworks to analyze student strengths and weaknesses and the language demands of the setting, and provide structures for organizing appropriate intervention strategies. First, a model for understanding conversation and necessary conversational skills organizes pragmatic language skills into three primary components: communicative intentions, presupposition, and the social organization of discourse. Then a model for understanding listening skills examines different components including the message, the cognitive processes involved in effective listening, and the listener's response. Strategies to improve the oral language of instruction involve improving communicative intentions, presupposition skills, and management of and participation in discourse. Strategies to improve listening skills call for the development of improved attention, language, memory, and comprehension skills. (JDD)

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Chapter Thirteen

Oral Language: Developing Pragmatic Skills and Communicative Competence

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OVERVIEW

Youngsters with disabilities are often expected to compensate for poor reading and writing skills through listening and speaking. Rather than taking notes or reading the textbook, students are told by their teachers to listen carefully and ask questions. Unfortunately, many students with disabilities have difficulty speaking and/or listening. Furthermore, some youngsters are unaware that there are communication techniques which would assist them in school learning that are more effective than those they use.

This chapter addresses spoken language as pragmatics. This is defined as the use of language in its social context. The focus of this chapter is the use of language for learning, particularly in school. A number of authors (Butler, 1986; Westby, 1984) have pointed out that such a focus changes the way one addresses language or communication difficulties. Rather than focusing on the acquisition of isolated language rules (acquisition of phonology, syntax, or semantics), a person concerned with communicative competence will focus on language comprehension, retrieval and recall of previously presented information, and general effectiveness in integrating language skills for the purpose of successful functioning in a classroom or other social context. Thus, our concern becomes whether or not a youngster is successful in a communication act (e.g., his or her language performance accomplishing the intent of the interaction), rather than examination of the correctness of the utterances in terms of phonology, syntax, or semantics.

The chapter is organized in the following manner. First, it provides an overview of the language demands of the school setting. Then, a model for communication skills is described and a discussion of potential oral language deficits within the pragmatic context follows. Listening skills necessary for success in the school setting as well as potential deficit areas are then outlined. The final section provides suggestions for developing effective intervention programs in the area of communicative competence.

Language Skills for Learning

If we look at spoken language as an integrated set of skills that youngsters use in school to facilitate learning, our interest must focus on their ability to comprehend what they hear and their ability to be understood when they speak. If our concern is in improving these skills, then we should focus on increasing their ability to comprehend and communicate.

Oral Language Demands of the School Setting

What are the language demands of the instructional setting? Students must listen to varied messages in many different settings within school. Students must be able to follow oral directions, comprehend lectures or extended discourses, often in large group settings with little opportunity to give the speaker immediate feedback on comprehension. Furthermore, the listening demands of the classroom increase dramatically as youngsters grow older. Researchers (Goodlad, 1984; Wilt, 1949) found elementary students were required to listen for over 50% of the school day. Others

(Moran, 1980) found that teachers in regular junior and senior high school classrooms talked for 80% of the time spent in verbal interactions in the classroom and that this discourse consisted of 75% lecturing and 25% questioning about subject matter content. Yet, teachers seldom presented advanced organizers to assist youngsters in listening more effectively and seldom modified their rate of speech so that youngsters would have an easier time taking notes. This represents an environment which might tax the listening skills of proficient students and possibly overwhelm youngsters for whom listening is difficult.

Oral language is also comprised of speaking. Speaking skills are necessary to ask questions, respond appropriately in instructional interactions, and further social contacts and relationships. Unfortunately, youngsters with disabilities may have difficulty in the role of speaker.

The language of school is intended to assist youngsters in the acquisition of cognitive and social skills. However, the language of school, which includes curricular materials, teacher-directed instruction, and peer interactions may not, in fact, accomplish this goal. Frequently there is a mismatch between the language demands of the classroom and the language ability of the student. Textbooks or curriculum content may assume some prior knowledge on the part of the student when it does not exist. Or, teachers may not be aware of effective communication skills, thus making it harder for the student to profit from instruction. Furthermore, the greater the difference between a child's life experience and the demands of the classroom, the more difficult it may be for a youngster to profit from the academic setting. Given this context, it is our responsibility as educators to not only increase the communication skills of our students, but to also provide the best possible match between student ability and the language environment of the school.

When youngsters enter school, they shift from the language of the home to the language of instruction. Nelson (1984) provided examples of how the language used in school may differ from the language of the home:

1. The language of the schools is frequently used to give directions and to control behavior. For example, a first grade teacher begins the day:

   All right, let's get back to your seats.
   Let's have our flag salute.
   Dedra, we're waiting on you, honey.
   Drew, forget how it starts?
   It starts with "I".
   Remember, you're standing up / tall and straight / and you look like a letter. (p. 163)

2. Teacher talk is frequently directed to attentional strategies, as this second grade teacher illustrates:

   Now, before you start I want to check to see about my listener.
   OK, Lisa was a good listener.
   Randy was fairly good.
   Aaaaa, and this Randy was fairly good.
   Eric, you were not good, you got almost all your work filled in/you weren't listening.

Now boys and girls / listening is important / for one reason / you will need it later on.
If you get in the habit of listening / then / no matter what job you have to do / then we'll have, we'll have that to do it with. (p. 163)

3. Teacher talk, although designed to enhance understanding, is not always clear. In this example, the teacher's discourse is designed to link past classroom experiences with a current science project. The reader may judge if this third grade teacher has accomplished that objective:

   OK, everybody sit down now.
   What you're gonna be doing today / is / you're gonna grow your own crystals.
   If you remember last week / we grew some crystals back there but I kinda put it together didn't I?
   Well this week you're gonna grow you own.
   How many people in here / know what a tea bag is?
   Right, only these tea bags are a different kind of tea bag.
   These things / they look about the same on both ends but if you're really careful you can open the top part up. (p. 168)

4. In the following example, metalinguistic skills are being tapped. Using language to think about language requires a level of abstraction that may not be present in some children. This sixth grade teacher is providing instructions for a group reading task:

   OK / uh / now we're working with the/ base form and the / s/ form of verbs.
   The first part / you're supposed to / uh / complete the sentence with / uh / with what / either one, either the "s" form or the base form.
   Will you please read the sentence?
   No you're on the wrong sentence. (p. 171)

As one can see in the above examples, the language of instruction places great demands on listening comprehension and carries with it many errors in communication. False starts, repetitions, lack of clarity, and abstract language usage beyond the potential knowledge base of the listener will increase the comprehension difficulty for the student. For a student with language difficulties or language immaturity in contrast to age peers, the instructional setting may not facilitate the likelihood of effective communication. To be a successful learner in this setting, a youngster must have within his or her repertoire listening skills and speaking skills which might be different from listening and speaking skills that are effective or sufficient in other areas of his or her life.

Given concerns about the language demands of the school setting and the difficulty it may pose to students, two models follow that frame our understanding of potential interventions. While many communication models exist, these two provide appropriate levels of analysis and focus for our purpose. One model will focus on the youngster as speaker in a communication act, while the other will focus on the youngster as listener.

A Framework for Understanding Communication

To understand conversation and necessary conversational skills, a model proposed by Spekman and Roth (1982) is discussed. They organize pragmatic language skills into three primary components: communicative intentions, presupposition, and the social organization of discourse.

Communicative Intentions

The first component, communicative intention, involves the ability to convey the intended purpose of a message. These purposes might include greeting, requesting, informing, protesting, or directing. This is done in a variety of ways. Gesture might be used, paralinguistic skills (e.g., intonation, pitch, intensity, stress on particular sounds) might come into play, or linguistic skills (specific words or wording) might convey the intent of a message. Communicative intent could be conveyed through the use of a single communication mode, or any combination of those listed. For example, a youngster might communicate his desire for a newly baked cookie by coming close to the plate, saying "Mmmmm", while pretending to take a cookie. Or that same youngster might ask "Can I have a cookie?". If the youngster said "Smells good!", the intent of that message requires more effort on the part of the listener. The youngster may be asking for a cookie or just reporting on what he smells. The same message can convey a variety of intents. A more literal message requires less effort to understand. Another message might require a greater degree of inference on the part of the listener, thus demanding more skill in listening and comprehending. Knowledge about communicating intent will enable a youngster to speak more effectively.

Presupposition

Presupposition refers to the speaker's ability to develop a message that takes into account the listener's needs. Knowledge about the listener's probable prior knowledge about the topic, awareness of how the message relates to the social context, and knowledge about how much information is necessary, must all come into play in formulating a message that will communicate to the listener. This ability to understand or take the role of the listener is important for effective communication. For example, if two students were on a field trip to the zoo yesterday and one says to the other "That lion we saw yesterday was big!", understanding of the message can be expected because of shared prior knowledge of the event. On the other hand, if one of the youngsters did not go to the zoo, nor knew of the field trip, that message might require more clarification before it is understood. Altering the way a message is framed because of the age of a listener is another example of presupposition skills.

Social Organization of Discourse

This level of communication, social organization of discourse, refers to ones' ability to maintain a conversation over several conversational turns. This relates to a youngster's ability to alternate between the speaker and listener role, following the rules of effective communication as they relate to each role. For example, initiating a conversation and indicating when it is the other person's turn to respond, turning the conversation over to the listener within an appropriate time frame, listening and then responding appropriately, make up the social organization of discourse. Effective conversational partners will manage this flow back and forth, resulting in adequate comprehension.

Context

The final element of communication is knowledge about the context in which the message giving and message receiving is taking place, and how that variable will impact on communication success. For example, when talking with someone as a brass band is marching by, an effective communicator will alter the message accordingly.

Difficulties Youngsters Might Exhibit as the Speaker

While the language difficulties of individuals with mental disabilities will vary considerably, consideration of the types of difficulties youngsters with language problems have within the context of communicative competence will help direct teachers' selections of appropriate interventions. Research in this area is in the preliminary stages, however existing findings provide some insight into the potential problems youngsters might exhibit.

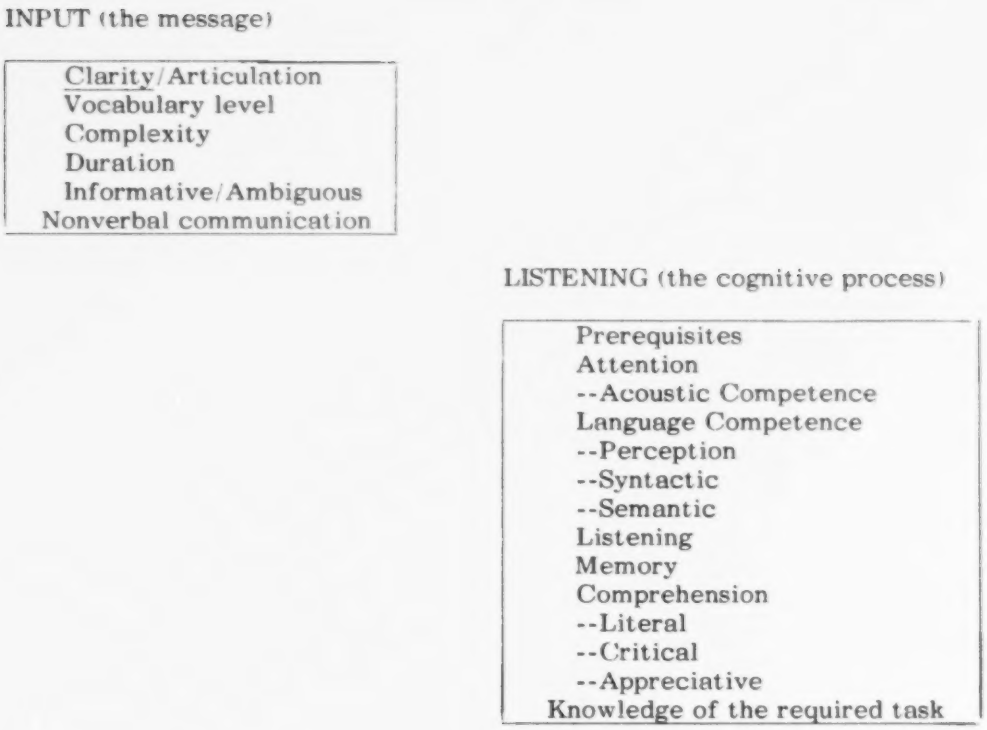
Johnson, Johnston, and Weinrich (1984), in a study of language-delayed school children, found frequently occurring problems in four broad areas. Children had difficulty with topicalization. This encompassed difficulty in establishing the topic and making appropriate comments, lack of topic change markers, and failure to maintain a topic for a sufficient length of time. Children also exhibited difficulty adhering to conversational rules. This included lack of sentence termination, missing discourse connectors, inability to respond when called upon, difficulty knowing when to take turns, inability to ask or answer questions, and inability to open and close conversations. The third broad area of difficulty, problems with register, included provision of insufficient information for a listener, and inability to adjust their register to the language of the speaker. The last problem area, difficulty with syntactic forms, included frequent use of redundant information, deletion of necessary information, failure to use references and referent error, failure to order old and new information into sentences, and difficulty using pronouns and articles to signal old and new information. Other researchers confirm similar difficulties in language disabled, learning disabled, and cognitively delayed youngsters (Bryan & Phlaum, 1978; Spekman, 1981; Bryan, Donahue, Pearl, & Sturm, 1981). The social impact of these communication deficits are profound. Youngsters exhibit difficulty maintaining peer relations as well as having difficulty interpreting correctly the language of school and learning.

A Framework for Understanding Listening Skills

This author and colleagues (Robinson & Smith, 1981) have proposed a model of listening which is useful in providing a broad framework to examine the different component skills of listening for the purpose of instruction. This model includes three major parts: the message, the cognitive processes involved in effective listening, and the listener's response. There exists a reciprocal interaction between the parts, and a careful analysis of the components in classroom settings is necessary before appropriate instruction can be designed. Each part will be discussed briefly and a graphic depiction of the model is represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

A Model to Define Listening



The Message

Considerations of what one must account for in the development of an effective message were discussed at length in the previous section. However, the perspective of Robinson and Smith (1981) will be reviewed briefly. They, like Spekman and Roth (1982), noted that a message consists of words, sounds and nonverbal actions. Various characteristics will influence the ease with which the listener will comprehend the message.

The clarity of speech, in terms of articulation, dialect, starts and stops, or presence or absence of competing background noise, can effect listening success. The speaker's vocabulary level can influence listening success. If there is a mismatch between vocabulary used to convey the message and the listener's vocabulary level, then there is a greater likelihood that accurate comprehension will not occur. Beyond vocabulary, the complexity of the intended message will effect the listener's comprehension. Conceptually complex or abstract ideas may be hard to understand regardless of the vocabulary used to explain them. The length of a message, or the

duration, can create listener fatigue or inattention, and the informative versus ambiguous quality of a message will facilitate or impede understanding. Finally, the presence of appropriate nonverbal information (gestures, facial expressions, etc.) will serve to help the listener understand the message better, while absent or conflicting nonverbal input may serve to cloud the meaning of a communication. The way the message is constructed will contribute greatly to how a listener comprehends.

Listening--The Cognitive Process

The components of effective listening can be conceptualized as three subparts which must interact in an integrated fashion. The first subpart is comprised of the prerequisite skills of attention, acoustic competence, and language competence. The second subpart includes the cognitive processes of memory and comprehension, and the last subpart is knowledge about response options. Each subpart will be discussed separately.

Prerequisite skills. There is a set of skills that must be present to some degree for effective listening to occur. Selective attention, or the ability to attend to relevant or central stimuli, is a necessary listener skill. Acoustic competence, or hearing acuity, must also be present to a sufficient degree. The level of language competence in specific skill areas (i.e., phonological skills, knowledge of syntactic rules and semantics) will either facilitate or interfere with comprehension of the message and appropriate participation in a communication act. Attempting to increase skills in these areas of oral language is not the focus of this chapter. Intervention at that level of language learning, while helpful and worthy of attention, does not assure a student will become more effective in communication or using language to learn. However, as a teacher, it is important to know at what level a youngster is functioning relative to those language skills to determine if the youngster has the prererquisite language knowledge for the messages he or she will receive in the existing school setting.

Listening

Effective listening in school is dependent on memory and comprehension. While they are not identical, they are inseparably linked. Listening comprehension activities in school might be characterized in three ways: those that place a high demand on intentional, strategic remembering; those that are primarily semantic in nature, thus allowing the youngster to increase comprehension by deliberately tying what they hear to what they already know; and those that require little intentional remembering because of high interest or salience. For example, those that place a high demand on intentional memory storage and retrieval strategies might include remembering directions on how to do a new task, or remembering the spelling of a word the teacher has just spelled orally. These kinds of listening comprehension tasks require verbatim recall, thus demand effective memory skills. Comprehension activities that are semantic in nature might include comprehending and remembering the gist of a lecture or a story read orally. Verbatim recall of the information is not necessary, and relating what one has heard to prior knowledge one already has about the topic facilitates both comprehension and retention. However, if there is little prior knowledge of the information to be remembered, or if it needs to be retrieved later (possibly for a test or an assignment) more deliberate, strategic memory

activity is required. The third listening comprehension activity is purely semantic in nature, requiring no deliberate memory storage or retrieval techniques. When participating in a conversation about birthdays, favorites toys, or other topics of high interest or salience, youngsters might use involuntary recollection, vocabulary knowledge, and comprehension strategies to understand what is being said (for example, reflecting on prior knowledge or comprehension monitoring). They do not need to use deliberate memory strategies to assist in comprehension.

Memory is linked to the listening comprehension process. If a message is not encoded, stored, and available for retrevial, comprehension for the purpose of learning cannot occur. Therefore, the development of memory skills can assist disabled learners to be more effective listeners.

Knowledge About Response Options

As stated earlier, spoken language in the learning and social context is comprised of speaking and listening effectively. These two skill areas are intertwined and a youngster moves from the role of listener to that of speaker as part of the communicative process. Therefore, students must know how to act on what they have listened to; they may make a motoric or nonverbal response, a written response, or a verbal response. From an instructional perspective, an observable response is important if communication success is to be determined.

Difficulties Youngsters Might Exhibit in Listening Effectively

Little research exists that examines the listening skills of disabled children and youth in relation to the communicative act. However, an analysis of research addressing the component parts of listening suggests many youngsters with mental disabilities have difficulty listening effectively. Certainly, teacher reports confirm this supposition; many youngsters demonstrate difficulty following oral directions, attending to or comprehending class lectures or discussions, following a conversation, or retreiving orally received information at a later time.

There is substantial research delineating the attentional deficits of youngsters with mental disabilities (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1975). These children often have difficulty filtering out extraneous stimuli and attending selectively to a focal task. Semantic or syntactic deficits can also inhibit listening proficiency. Butler (1986) found in reviewing the research on language disabilities, that many disabled youngsters exhibit a range of language deficits regardless of the primary handicapping condition.

Memory deficits also impact on listening ability. Researchers (Flavell & Wellman, 1977) found youngsters with mental disabilities did not use memory strategies like rehearsal and clustering to assist themselves in remembering oral information. However, when taught memory strategies, youngsters improved their retrevial of listened-to information significantly.

Many disabled youngsters are deficient in the use of comprehension strategies. Brown (as cited in Kail, 1979) discussed prose recall in terms of constructive memory processes. "People use their knowledge to embellish, elaborate, and otherwise go beyond the information given as they represent information in memory (Kail, 1979, p. 84)." Comprehension monitoring is such a cognitive activity. Skilled listeners

transform information in order to understand it. They use their stored knowledge to help generate hypotheses about the best possible interpretation of what they hear and evaluate how well their interpretation fits the material, thus retaining or revising their understanding as needed. Spekman (1981) found youngsters with disabilities had difficulty monitoring their comprehension in conversations with peers. They did not ask for clarification of ambiguous messages, and refused new information even when the message they heard was confusing. In another study, students with disabilities said they understood the rules of a game, before they had been told enough to make that possible (Kotsonis & Patterson, 1980). In light of these difficulties, it is no wonder many youngsters with disabilities do not listen effectively to facilitate their learning.

Summary of Intervention Frameworks

The two models of described facets of the communication process provide a framework to analyze student strengths and weaknesses as well as the general language demands of the setting. They also serve as a structure for organizing appropriate intervention strategies. Some students will need to work on their skills as the speaker, some as a listener, and some as managers or participants in communicative acts. The following section delineates a selection of intervention tactics that teachers of students with disabilities could use to assist youngsters in improving their spoken language skills.

Interventions

Given our understanding of the spoken language skills needed for learning in school and participating in social contexts, this section will address intervention from two perspectives. First, improving the language of school so that it better facilitates learning will be discussed. Many youngsters need to improve their spoken language skills and that process takes time. Thus, teachers may need to modify the messages and conversational context of the instructional setting to increase language comprehension in their students, as well as provide a better model of communicative competence. Second, intervention strategies designed to improve youngsters' skills as speakers, listeners, and conversational partners will be described.

Strategies to Improve the Language of School

The models discussed previously to describe listening and speaking will be used to frame intervention suggestions. For the teacher to effectively improve the messages or language of instruction, she or he must be aware of message components that, if well matched to the listener's language ability, can facilitate understanding. These include clarity of speech, vocabulary level, complexity of ideas presented, duration, informative quality, nonverbal and paralinguistic components, as well as general environmental or contextual factors affecting comprehension. Each will be discussed in relation to the listener.

Attention

The speaker can facilitate listener attention in a variety of ways. One powerful technique is the use of advanced organizers. An advanced organizer is a statement that lets the listener know what he is going to hear. This provides a structure for information that will follow and assists the listener in comprehending. Lenz (1982)

found that well constructed advanced organizers increased handicapped youngsters' understanding of lecture material. They include ten steps in developing instructionally sound advanced organizers.

1. Inform students of the advanced organizer.

   "Now I am going to tell you what we will do today. Please pay careful attention."

2. Identify topics or activities that will transpire.

   "We will be discussing sources of energy. Specifically, we will discuss oil, gas, and the sun."

3. Provide an organizational framework either as an outline, list, or narrative of the lesson's content.

4. Clarify the teacher's and expected students' actions.

   "I will review the points made in your text book. I want you to follow along in your book."

5. Provide background information, relating the topic to previously discussed information or student experience.

   "Yesterday we talked about the world's growing energy needs. What are some of your family's energy needs? How has that changed over the last 20 years?"

6. State the concept(s) to be learned.

7. Clarify the concepts by providing examples and non-examples.

   "You will learn that energy needs can be met in a variety of ways and that conservation of resources applies to this discussion of energy. For example, when someone builds a house, they must make some decisions about how to heat their house. What might some of those considerations be?

8. Motivate students to learn by pointing out the relevance of the topic to them in a personalized and believable fashion.

9. Introduce new or difficult vocabulary.

10. State the general outcome desired.

    "At the end of today's lesson, I want you to be able to.....
    You will need to know this to complete the activity."

A well constructed advanced organizer focuses the listener on that to which they must attend. Others (Hallahan & Kauffman, 1975; Kazden, 1973) found teacher attention to be an efficient and effective strategy to increase attention. Proximity

or eye contact assists the listener. Attention to environmental factors like extraneous noise or visual input, can also assist the listener. Finally, sensitivity to the approximate duration, or length of time the listener can be expected to attend should guide the speaker.

Language

The teacher must be aware of the youngsters' syntactic and semantic skills. Messages can be restated; vocabulary or syntactic structure can be simplified. Important or new vocabulary should be introduced and taught directly. It cannot be assumed that youngsters will automatically pick up the meaning from context.

Memory

Persons with effective comprehension skills use a variety of memory strategies to encode, store, and retrieve information. Enhancement of youngsters' memory can occur if the speaker (e.g., teacher) is knowledgeable about organizational strategies used in memorization. Wiig and Semel (1980) discussed various elements of discourse that a speaker can control. These include word frequency, logical relationships, linguistic structure, length of utterance, serial position of important information, and salience or immediate relevance.

Words used in everyday speech are considered high frequency words. They tend to be more easily recalled than low frequency words. Teachers should listen to the speech of their students in non-instructional situations (lunch, recess, etc.) to get a sense of the common vocabulary of their students. Word lists common to educators (e.g., the Dolch word list) also provide information about high frequency words common within the instructional setting.

Associative strength refers to the connection that can be made between important words in a message. Words with strong associations (dish, cup, bowl and knife, fork, spoon) are easier to recall when placed together in logical categories. While categorization is an effective mnemonic technique, few youngsters with language or memory difficulties use it without guidance.

Other variables that speakers can control to assist the listener in remembering information are length of utterances, linguistic structure, and consideration of the serial position of information. While seemingly self-evident, teachers sometimes do not monitor the length of their utterances. The length of a statement or the duration of a series of statements can facilitate understanding or confuse a listener depending on the speaker's ability to match language used to listener ability. However, not all long sentences are difficult to remember. Well constructed utterances consisting of related information can be easy to remember.

The position of words in a sentence or in an extended discourse can facilitate recall. Final words or ideas are easier to remember than initial words, and ideas or words in middle positions are most difficult to recall. These effects are called primacy (initial word) recall in contrast to recency (last word) recall. Many developmentally delayed youngsters remember the last words or ideas presented and forget those given first (Hallahan & Kneedler, 1979). Therefore, structuring discourse so that most important information is given last makes instructional sense.

Restatements of important information should be carefully monitored by the teacher. Research (Wiig & Semel, 1980) demonstrated that changes in restatements confuse when the delay between statements was longer than 45 seconds. Therefore, when the teacher is cognizant that she was unclear and needs to explain or try again, she should inform students that that is occurring; she is "clearing the slate" and going to restate the information.

Finally, information that is relevant to the listener is more easily remembered than information for which the listener has no prior knowledge. The concept of prior knowledge is extremely important to understanding comprehension and is discussed in some detail in the following section. Briefly, if youngsters are provided a salient referent, either from familiarity or interest, connecting what they already know to what one wants them to know, comprehension is more likely to occur. Providing relevant examples, non-examples, and analogies are important and powerful instructional techniques for teachers to develop.

Increasing Comprehension

Research has demonstrated that comprehension is dependent to a large degree on what one already knows about a topic under discussion. This is called prior knowledge. A speaker can facilitate comprehension by helping the listener recall any knowledge he or she has about the topic. Then, new information can be integrated with existing knowledge.

There are many procedures teachers can use to enhance prior knowledge. Holmes and Roser (1987) discussed assessing students' prior knowledge through free recall, word association activities, structured questions, and unstructured discussion. In using free recall, a teacher might say to her students "Try to think of everything you know about __. I will write it down on the board." This information becomes the basis for the following instructional discussion. Word association activities require the teacher to develop a list of important vocabulary which will be basic to the following discussion. Then, the teacher might say "Today, we are going to discuss __. I'm going to give you a word, and I want you to tell me everything you can think of about that word as it relates to ___." All ideas are then saved on posterboard or the chalk board. Structured question activities require the teacher to prepare a set of questions that will quickly probe the knowledge a student might have about a topic prior to beginning a discussion about it. Unstructured discussion can also be used to probe prior knowledge. Students can be encouraged to talk about a related events or experiences before instruction begins.

Semantic feature analysis and semantic mapping are two techniques that also can be used to enhance prior knowledge (Anders & Bos, 1986; Johnson & Pearson, 1984). Both techniques require the teacher to provide vocabulary or key concepts for the students. The youngsters then free associate on the information provided. The teacher and students create a map illustrating the relationships among the vocabulary and concepts provided and those the students generate.

Facilitating Communicative Competence

Spekman and Roth (1982) described methods teachers can use to increase the communicative competence of their students. Within the model they developed, teacher modification in communicating intent, presupposition, and directing the

social organization of discourse is discussed. They noted that all intervention activities should take into consideration variations in the physical setting, variations in the partner with whom communication activities are occuring, and contexts which take into account the interests and motivational attributes of the youngster.

Communicating Intention

To clarify communicative intent, teachers can provide deliberate models of different types of requests. Teachers can model requests for information (What did you do after school last night?), requests for action (Give me your notebook.), responses to requests (I do not want to return that paper at this time.), statements (I went to the baseball game last night.), attention seeking comments (Look at this!), protesting (I don't like the way you acted toward him.), greetings (How are you doing today?), and other comments intending humor, sarcasm, warnings, exclamations, etc. (You are so silly!). This will provide a model for youngsters to follow. Furthermore, if teachers want to encourage their students in the use of this communication principle, it is important to respond to communicative intents students make in a meaningful way. When focusing on the development of communication skills, teachers must respond to communicative intents and quell the inclination to correct syntax or semantics. Rather than correcting a student's question, the teacher should first answer it, and then provide an alternative, correct model. For example, when people engage in conversation, they accept shortcuts in language. This is a form of discourse called ellipsis. If you asked a friend, "Do you want a ride to work?" and he responded "Yeah, eight is good," you would conclude that the conversation met its intended purpose. Yet teachers might step in and say to a student "Say 'Yes. Please pick me up at eight o'clock'." Teachers should focus on syntax only after responding to the comment or answering the question the student has posed. Then, the teacher is responding to communicative intent first and grammatical considerations second.

Presupposition

Presupposition addresses the communication principle of role-taking. Teachers can provide regular models of role-taking within the conversational context. For example, teachers can discuss others' point of view: "How do you think he feels?", "If I were him, I would think...." An appropriate model provides a starting point for direct instruction in this language skill. Prompts, reinforcement of successive approximations by a student would follow. Teachers can also assign a perspective to students prior to a discussion. A direction like "Listen to this information as though you are a parent." enhances the skill of reflecting on others' points of view.

Social Discourse

When a teacher wants to encourage social discourse, certain conversational "errors" should be tolerated without correction. When responding to a student's comment with "John, use a a complete sentence." a violation of conversational rules has occured. While understanding, the teacher did not confirm conversational intent, thus throwing the conversation off course. On the other hand, students can be taught through direct instruction procedures how to approach certain conversational situations appropriately. Teachers can generate a list of rules, or formulate a series of steps that are appropriate for particular situations. For example, the ASSET Program for Social Skill Training (Hazel, Schumaker, Sherman, & Sheldon-Wilgen, (1981), delineates a series of conversation rules for various social situations common in school. When accepting criticism students are taught to:

1. Face the person.

2. Maintain eye contact.

3. Use a normal voice tone.

4. Have a serious facial expression.

5. Posture should be straight.

6. Stay near the person talking.

7. Listen closely to what the person says.

8. Restate to check that you understand the criticism. If you don't understand, ask for more information.

9. If you agree, apologize and ask for suggestions. If you don't agree, say you understand and tell your side with the facts.

10. Say you will change, if necessary.

In this manner, appropriate conversational skills can be delineated, modeled, and practiced.

The teacher can modify the language of school in numerous ways to facilitate youngsters' comprehension of language. However, that is not always possible, and some youngsters need to develop better oral language skills. Therefore, we will turn our attention to intervention techniques designed to improve speaking and listening skills.

Strategies to Improve Oral Language

Framed by Spekman and Roth's (1982, 1984) model of communicative competence, intervention strategies will address improving communicative intentions, presupposition skills, and the appropriate management and participation in discourse.

Communicative Intentions

The instructional goal in the area of communicative intention is to increase the ways in which youngsters use language. Specifically, two objectives should be considered:

1. To increase the range of intentions for which language is used: (a) to request information; (b) to request action or direct others' behavior; (c) to respond to requests; (d) to state or comment; (e) to seek attention; (f) to greet; (g) to protest, reject, and deny; and (h) to accomplish other acts such as sarcasm, humor, and so forth.

2. To increase the variety of forms comprehended and used to express specific communicative intentions. Form can be viewed along three dimensions. One entails the utilization of gestural, paralinguistic, or

verbal forms; the second involves syntactic form (e.g., declarative, interrogative, imperative forms); and the third involves such factors as the degree of explicitness and politeness (Spekman & Roth, 1984, p. 9)

Examples of how one might provide contexts where these objectives can be modeled and practiced follow.

Requests for Information

Activities can be developed which require the targeted youngster to ask for information. For example, have the youngster interview various people who will require different approaches (e.g., a younger child, a classmate, the janitor) about different topics (e.g., favorite activities, occupations, opinions). Or send the child to gather information. Role-playing activities can provide useful practice in communicating intent, as can games like twenty questions.

Requests for Action

Youngsters can be encouraged to direct others to do something. Games in which one child must direct the other would accomplish this goal, as would structuring the environment so that youngsters must ask to get access to materials, to leave the room, or get teacher attention.

Responses to Requests

Students can be encouraged to respond to requests in a variety of ways. For example in a role-playing situation, students could practice different ways to signal confusion. Quizzical facial expressions, "Huh?", and "I don't understand." are ways to convey the same thing. However, some responses are more appropriate than others in certain situations.

Statements or Comments

Show and tell, discussions of current events, and debates are examples of activities that encourage oral expression. Teachers must encourage talk that requires students to clearly explain what they think.

Attention Seeking

Again, role-playing is extremely effective in providing practice for youngsters in seeking attention appropriately and encourages them to experiment and expand their existing repetoire of skills. Situations like gaining the attention of a busy salesclerk, interrupting the conversation between two adults or two children are examples of role-play options.

Protesting, Rejecting or Denying

The teacher can stage events that elicit protestations. For example, the teacher can ask the students to do something they do not like, or to eat an undesirable food. She can remove desired materials or make blatantly untrue statements to elicit responses.

Greetings

Introducing a youngster to a variety of people will encourage them to practice greetings. Calling on the phone is another activity. Again, role-playing provides opportunities for students to practice these skills and see how other youngsters might address conversational needs.

Finally, teachers can provide opportunities to warn, tease, use humor and perform other communicative intents. In all cases, modeling, practice with feedback, and opportunities to generalize skills are appropriate instructional tactics.

Presupposition

To be an effective communication partner, youngsters must learn to take into account their listener's needs. Age, sex, social status, cognitive level, previous experience, and familiarity are all taken into account when formulating a message. Therefore, instructional goals in this area include:

1. To increase the informativeness of messages both in terms of clarity and content.

2. To increase the sensitivity of messages to particular audiences and communicative situations (Spekman & Roth, 1984, p.14)

Techniques to increase presupposition skills include referential communication tasks. These are activities that require a speaker to direct the listener in doing specific activities. For example, having a youngster guide another who is blindfolded through a task verbally, or having a youngster give oral directions on how to do a paper and pencil task without being able to see what those directed are doing until the task is completed. Variables that can be changed to increase or decrease the difficulty of such tasks include varying partners by age or familiarity, varying the amount of visual communication allowed, varying the amount and quality of feedback the listener can provide the speaker, or varying the difficulty of the task itself. Children directing others to find an object in the room is another example of a referential communication activity, and one can imagine how the rules of that game can be varied to make it easy or hard.

In addition, role-playing, or assigned perspective taking can provide opportunities for developing presupposition skills. Questioning students about the perspective of others helps create awareness. Creating plays or telling stories to varied audiences are other enjoyable activities that build communicative competence.

The Social Organization of Discourse

To increase a youngster's effectiveness as a conversational partner, Spekman and Roth (1984) recommended addressing the following objectives:

1. To increase the amount of speech which is socially directed to another person within social situations.

2. To develop appropriate turn-taking skills, including the use of topic-related utterances and the willingness to share the conversational floor.

3. To develop, increase, or improve the use of appropriate conversational initiation strategies.

4. To develop, increase, or improve the use of appropriate conversational maintenance strategies.
5. To develop, increase, or improve the use of appropriate conversational termination strategies (p. 15)

Conversation is more likely to occur when youngsters are involved in motivating situations or when individual interests are addressed. Any time youngsters are involved in communal activities (e.g., team learning situations, joint projects, cooperative assignment completion), opportunities for conversation increase. However, such activities must be structured so that each youngster has a role, and a contribution to provide. Otherwise a youngster with conversation deficits will have the option to not participate.

Structured conversational situations (the teacher calling on students, practicing Halloween trick-or-treat requests, telephone greetings) can provide the teacher opportunities for direct instruction in conversational rules. Conversation can be viewed as having three parts: initiation, one or more utterences which maintain the topic, and topic termination (Spekman & Roth, 1984). Students can be instructed in appropriate conversational options within these varied situations.

Finally, youngsters might need instruction and practice using "repair" strategies. Often communication breaks down, a message is not understood, the speaker or listener have difficulty maintaining their role, and someone must put the conversation back on track. Role-playing is effective in providing practice in requesting clarification, confirming understanding, asking for elaboration or repetition (Garvey, 1977). Viewing videotapes of various conversational exchanges can provide powerful models that teachers may use in various instructional capacities.

In conclusion, there are numerous tactics teachers might employ to increase the communicative competence of their students. It is important to realize that many youngsters may not develop these skills naturally, yet they are crucial to success in school and adult living. Thus, direct instruction in effective communication may be warranted.

Strategies to Improve Listening Skills

The model of listening delineated by Robinson and Smith (1981) is used to organize intervention suggestions. Thus, the development of improved attention, language, memory, and comprehension skills is discussed.

Attention

Modeling of self-instructional or self-management techniques is a powerful means of teaching youngsters to monitor and increase their attention. An example of a self-instructional sequence follows. The teacher might first provide a verbal model: "Okay, I'm getting ready to listen, I have to remember to listen for the important points..." After listening to the message, the teacher then models again: "Now, what was said?" (Restates or paraphrases the message.) "What are the important points? What am I supposed to do next?" After seeing the model, the

youngster practices the self-instructional technique in practice and real situations. Feedback on use of the technique and reteaching if necessary completes the instructional sequence. Self-monitoring procedures have proven useful in improving student attention (Hallahan & Bryan, 1980). Students kept a tape recorder in their desk with a tape on which there were intermittantly spaced low tones. Each time the child heard a tone, he was to record on a sheet whether or not he was paying attention. Eventually, use of the tape was faded out. This technique has proved powerful in improving attentional skills by enhancing self-monitoring behavior.

Language Competence

Many students with mental disabilities may have difficulty with listening tasks because of delays or deficits in particular component parts of language learning. Thus, instruction in semantics and syntax might be necessary and appropriate. However, this author recommends that such instruction occur concurrent with instruction in communicative competence, thus enhancing such instruction's relevance to communication. Readers interested in specific language strategies should consult Wiig and Semel (1980), district-level speech and language therapists, or any of the excellent language development programs commonly in use.

Memory

As discussed earlier, much of the listening in which youngsters in school engage requires memorization. Students must encode and store information for future retrieval. Often retrieval activities make very specific demands on the listener. For example, to participate in ongoing discussions for a unit of study, youngsters are expected to remember what was discussed yesterday or last week; students must remember oral directions on how to do an assignment or, they must remember information shared in a class discussion or lecture because they will be tested over it. The language of school in contrast to that of the home or social environments, may demand more deliberate, intentional memorization behavior from youngsters. Thus, teaching youngsters how to apply memory strategies to listening tasks is recommended.

Memory Strategies

Robinson (1983) found two memory strategies, cummulative verbal rehearsal and self-questioning, effective in increasing listening comprehension of youngsters with severe learning disabilities. Examples follow. The rehearsal strategy was taught in conjunction with a following directions task. The teacher said:

> You can help yourself remember what you hear. One way to help yourself remember better is by softly repeating what you hear immediately after it is said. Repeating what you hear over and over is a way to keep the information in the front of your mind so you can remember it until you use it. If I were told some directions, I might rehearse by repeating the directions to myself, while using my finger to practice what I'm supposed to do on my worksheet.

Students' ability to follow grade appropriate directions improved dramatically when students used this technique.

Students were also taught to use a self-questioning strategy to check their comprehension of lecture or prose material. The teacher introduced the strategy in the following way:

> You can help yourself remember what you hear by asking yourself questions. For example, when you hear a story or some information, you can ask yourself some questions, or test yourself, before and after you listen. Asking yourself some general questions will help you get ready to listen carefully by reminding you of what information to listen for. Answering your questions, before answering the teacher's will help you remember the important information. A good set of questions might include:
>
> What is the (story, lecture) about?
> Who was in the (story, lecture)?
> Where did the events take place?
> When did they take place - in what order?
> Why is this information important or useful to me?

By enhancing the self-monitoring and self-instructional abilities of the youngster, listening comprehension showed significant improvement. Youngsters can also be taught to use the memory strategies of coding (or creating mnemonic devices), visualization, or clustering to aid in remembering information they hear.

Notetaking

Students can also be taught to develop memory aids to better remember listened to information. Notetaking is such an aid. A strategy developed at the University of Kansas Institute for Research in Learning Disabilities has proven effective in increasing youngsters' with disabilities notetaking skills (Denton & Schumaker, 1981). This strategy has three parts. First, students are taught to listen for verbal cues that signal important information will follow. Emphasis cues focus attention (You need to know..., Listen carefully to the next point..., Let me explain..., This is important...), organizational cues explain order, sequence or relationships (First..., second...; Next...; Today we will discuss...; To summarize...), and mannerism cues relate to specific speaker habits (spells out important words, repeats words for emphasis, uses a different voice tone). When they are proficient in identifying verbal cues, students are taught to identify important information, telegraph it (or shorten it so that it can be written easily), and stack it into outline form. A structured notetaking format is recommended. Students are taught to put main ideas or topics in a column on the left side of the page, and list details on the right. They are encouraged to space out the notes so that they are easier to read.

Instructional Methodology

In all the examples given, strategies were taught in a systematic way. First, students' existing habits were assessed, then the strategy was described and modeled by the teacher, students rehearsed the strategy steps until they could repeat them, then students practiced the strategy in controlled or easy materials with teacher feedback before using the strategy in grade or situation appropriate material.

Comprehension

Comprehension and memory strategies are interconnected. The content of the message provides a vehicle for practicing the previously mentioned strategies. Also, the comprehension techniques discussed in the section entitled "Strategies to Improve the Language of School" can be taught within a comprehension monitoring context. In other words, students can be taught to instruct themselves in checking their prior knowledge of a topic through recall, word association, and reflection. Students can also be taught to monitor communicative intention, considerations to be made in understanding the speaker (age, familiarity, etc.), their following of the rules of conversational listening (e.g., eye contact, proximity, facial expression), as well as nonverbal and paralinguistic components of the message.

Many students must be taught to be better listeners. They are deficient in these skills and do not seem to learn them automatically. Thus, direct instruction in effective listening skills is warranted.

SUMMARY

In summary, improving communicative competence is an appropriate instructional goal if we want students to use the language of school to learn. It is also evident that teachers must monitor the language of school (including curriculum materials, teacher talk, and social interactions) so that a) a language environment that better matches student ability can be provided, and b) teachers can better pinpoint student deficits in the area of communicative competence. Teaching youngsters with mental disabilities to be more effective participants in communicative acts will impact on their ability to profit from school, as well as improve their adaptive skills in relating to others in social, occupational and independent living situations.

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